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Rowan story

In the quiet folds of old England, where the hills roll like sleeping giants and the rivers whisper secrets to the reeds, there lies a village called Eldridge. Smoke drifts from low chimneys, children chase geese across the green, and the air smells of damp earth and baking bread. Life here is small, steady, unremarkable—until you look closer.

Rowan lived in the last cottage on the lane, the one with the crooked gate and ivy that climbed the walls like old friends. He was fifteen, hair the color of autumn leaves, eyes green as moss after rain. He moved through days like a shadow—helpful, quiet, always there when someone needed a hand. His mother called him "the fixer," because he mended fences, patched roofs, and carved toys from scraps when his sisters cried. His brother teased him for it—"Still playing knight?"—but Rowan only smiled, shrugged, and kept on.

He didn't dream of crowns or quests. He dreamed of mornings where no one went hungry, where bullies didn't bruise, where his family laughed without fear. So he trained in secret: dawn runs through the mist, sticks swung like swords against the wind, rocks lifted till his arms burned. Not for glory. Just so he'd be enough—if trouble ever came.

Long before Arthur's name was sung, a power had stirred in the world—raw, bright, forbidden. Life itself, sealed away by watchers from beyond the stars. Locked in a relic, a cracked stone orb buried under roots older than memory, waiting for the righteous. Or the desperate. No one in Eldridge knew. No one asked. But the seal had begun to hum, faint as a heartbeat, and Rowan—without knowing—carried its echo in his blood.

That was the village. That was the boy. And that was the

beginning.

Page One: The Cottage Years

Rowan was born on a rainy March morning, the kind where the sky seemed to press down on the thatch. His mother wrapped him in wool, called him "my little flame" for the orange tuft on his head. By five he was toddling after his sisters—Lila, nine, bossy; Eda, seven, always laughing—through the mud lanes of Eldridge.

He learned early: if a chicken escaped, chase it. If the well bucket stuck, yank harder. If Dad's cart axle snapped, hold the wheel while he hammered. No one told him to—he just did.

Nights, he sat by the fire while Mum spun yarn, Dad mended boots. Rowan listened to old tales: knights, dragons, a king who pulled a sword from stone. He never said "I want that." Just stared into the flames, thinking: If I were strong enough, maybe no one'd need a knight.

Page Two: The Village Grind

At eight, the lads started noticing him—too small, too quiet. They'd shove him off the green during games, call him "carrot-head." Rowan didn't hit back. He'd walk home, wash the dirt off, then carve a whistle from elder wood and give it to the smallest bully's brother.

"Why?" his sister Lila asked once.

"Because he looked scared," Rowan said.

He trained alone after chores: ran laps around the churchyard till his legs shook, swung a hazel stick like a sword till blisters popped. Sweat stung his eyes, but he kept count—ten swings, twenty, thirty. Not for show. For the day he might need it.

Villagers noticed. Old Widow Hale called him "the fixer." The priest slipped him scraps of parchment—letters, prayers—so he could read by candlelight. Rowan learned slow, but steady. Words felt like tools, same as hammers.

Page Three: Dawn Promise

Twelve now. Taller, but still skinny. The village woke to mist and bells. Rowan rose first—fed the goats, fetched water, helped Mum knead dough. His brother, sixteen, slept late, grumbled when Rowan nudged him: "Up. Work won't wait."

One morning, a storm tore the mill roof. Rowan climbed up with rope and tar, patched it while wind howled. Hands raw, back aching. When he climbed down, the miller clapped his shoulder: "You're a good lad." Rowan just nodded—didn't smile.

Later, alone by the river, he skipped stones. Watched them bounce, vanish. Thought: If I keep going, maybe I'll be the one who stops things breaking. No grand vow. Just quiet certainty—like the river kept flowing, he'd keep fixing.

Page Four: The Quiet Storm

Thirteen came with rain that wouldn't stop. The river swelled, flooded the low fields. Villagers panicked—cows lowing, kids slipping in muck. Rowan didn't wait. He waded out knee-deep, rope looped over his shoulder, hauled the miller's boat back from the current. Hands numb, teeth chattering.

When he dragged it ashore, the miller gripped his arm: "You could've drowned, boy."

Rowan wiped water from his eyes. "But I didn't."

That night, by the fire, his mum pressed a hot cloth to his back. "You're too brave for your own good." He laughed—soft, tired. "Just didn't want the boat lost."

But alone later, under the eaves, he flexed his fingers. A faint green shimmer danced across his knuckles, gone quick as breath. He stared at it. Thought: That's new. Didn't tell anyone. Not yet.

Page Five: The First Crack

Fourteen. Spring thaw. The village buzzed—market day, traders from York with spices and cloth. Rowan helped unload crates, earned a copper for it. Spent half on sweets for his sisters.

Then trouble: two strangers—rough men, cloaks too fine—

cornered the baker's boy over a debt. Pushed him against the wall, knife glinting. Rowan stepped in. No shout. Just stood there, eyes level. "Let him go."

They laughed. One swung. Rowan ducked—instinct—grabbed the wrist, twisted. The knife clattered. Second man lunged; Rowan shoved him back, harder than he meant. Bone cracked.

Silence. The men fled. Baker's boy stammered thanks. Rowan walked away, heart hammering. Felt the hum in his veins—stronger now. Like something waking.

That evening, he sat on the hill overlooking Eldridge. Watched lights flicker on in windows. Whispered to himself: "I didn't mean to hurt him." But deep down? He knew—he'd do it again. For family. For anyone No hero. Still just Rowan. But the seal? It hummed louder.

Page Six: The Night It Broke

It started with dogs barking—sharp, frantic, like they smelled smoke before anyone did. Rowan was up late, carving a wooden bird for Eda's birthday. Firelight danced on the walls; Mum hummed while she darned socks.

Then—crash. Door splintered. Three men burst in, cloaks black with soot, blades out. The first one grabbed Dad by the throat. "Where's the grain?" Dad shoved back—got a knife in the ribs for it.

Rowan froze. Saw blood bloom on Dad's shirt. Heard Mum scream—saw her lunge with a poker, get knocked down. Lila yanked Eda behind the table; brother charged, fist swinging—took a sword across the chest.

Rowan moved. Not brave—just instinct. Grabbed the poker, swung wild. Caught one bandit in the jaw—crack. The man staggered. Rowan didn't stop—shoved him out the door, into the yard.

Outside: chaos. Torches everywhere. Houses burning. Screams mixing with crackling wood. Villagers running, falling. A kid—little Tom—tripped, got trampled. Rowan pulled him up, shoved

him toward the woods. "Go!"

Bandits turned. One laughed—"Little hero." Rowan backed up, poker raised. Felt something hot in his chest—like the hum he'd ignored all these years. Green light flickered under his skin. He didn't notice.

They rushed him. He ducked, twisted—poker snapped against a shield. A blade grazed his arm—pain sharp, blood warm. Then he ran.

Through alleys, past burning carts, over bodies. Mum's voice echoed behind him: "Rowan—run!" He didn't look back. Couldn't.

Into the woods. Rain started—cold, heavy. Legs gave out under an oak. He curled up, soaked, shaking. Blood from his arm mixed with mud.

The village glowed red behind him. Smoke choked the sky.

He whispered their names—once. Then nothing. Just silence, and the slow drip of rain on leaves.

No more fixer. No more brother. Just Rowan—alive, alone, and empty.

Page Seven: The Silhouette

Rowan lay under the oak like a discarded rag—arm bleeding, breath shallow, eyes half-shut against the downpour. The world blurred: red glow of the village dying behind him, black branches clawing the sky. He thought this was it—cold, quiet, done.

Then—a shape. Tall, hooded, cutting through the mist like it belonged there. No sound at first, just boots on wet leaves. Rowan tried to move—couldn't. The figure knelt, cloak dripping, face hidden in shadow. A gloved hand—long fingers, pale—pressed to his forehead. Warm. Too warm.

"You're not dead yet," the voice said. Low, gravelly, like stones rolling in a stream. "But close."

Rowan mumbled—something about family. The old man didn't answer. Just lifted him, easy as a sack of grain, slung him over

one shoulder. Rowan felt the hum again—stronger now—like his blood answered the stranger's touch.

They walked. Through thorns, past streams, into deeper woods Rowan never knew existed. The rain stopped. Firelight flickered ahead—a cave mouth, low and warm.

Inside: herbs hanging, a cot of moss and wool. The old man laid him down, peeled back the torn sleeve. Wound closed under his fingers—no stitches, no pain. Just a faint green pulse, like Rowan's own light, but steadier.

Rowan blinked up. "Who…?"

The silhouette finally turned. Hood back—just enough. Eyes silver, skin like moonlit marble. Not human. Not quite.

"Call me Silas," he said. "And you're not finished. Not by a long shot."

Rowan didn't fight it. Just closed his eyes. For the first time since the raid… he breathed easy.

Page Eight: The First Clear Look

Rowan woke to the smell of pine smoke and something herbal—bitter, but warm. His arm didn't hurt anymore. The gash was just a pink line, like it'd been there years. He sat up slow, head spinning, blanket of wool slipping off.

The cave was small: stone walls veined with moss, a fire pit in the middle, shelves of jars and dried leaves. Silas stood at the entrance—back to him—stirring a pot over coals. Hood down now. Hair long, silver-white, tied with a leather cord. Skin pale as moonstone, but not wrinkled—smooth, almost too smooth. Eyes when he turned: silver, no pupils, like polished metal.

Rowan stared. Not scared—just… empty. "You're not from here."

Silas didn't flinch. "No. Not from anywhere you know." He ladled stew into a wooden bowl—roots, mushrooms, a bit of rabbit. Handed it over. "Eat. You're thin as a reed."

Rowan took it. Warmth seeped into his fingers. First bite burned

his tongue—he ate anyway. Silas watched, quiet. Then: "Your blood called me. The hum. Same as mine."

Rowan swallowed. "My family—"

"Dead," Silas said. Flat. Not cruel. "But you're not. That's why you're here."

Rowan looked down at the bowl. Steam curled up. "I don't want to be."

Silas knelt, level with him. "You don't get to choose yet. But you will."

Later—days blurred—Silas took him out. Woods deeper than Rowan remembered: ferns thick as blankets, streams clear as glass. Silas moved silent—picked berries, dug tubers, snapped twigs for snares. "Watch," he said. "Not everything needs a sword."

Rowan copied: hands shaking at first, but steadying. Pulled nettles with bare fingers—stung, but he didn't drop them. Caught a trout with a loop of vine. Silas nodded. "Good. Keep it simple."

Back at the cave, they dried what they gathered—hung herbs, salted fish. Rowan worked without words. Silas taught him knots, fires, how to read wind. No lectures. Just "Do."

One dusk, Rowan sat sharpening a stick—his old habit. Silas watched from the fire. "You're still fixing things," he said.

Rowan paused. "Habit."

Silas smiled—small, rare. "Good habit."

The cave felt less empty. Not home. But close.

Page Nine: The Hum Turns Real

Weeks passed in the cave—days of rain, nights of firelight. Silas taught without words: how to track deer by broken twigs, how to brew tea from willow bark, how to breathe till your mind went still. Rowan listened. Did. Didn't ask why.

One morning, Silas handed him a smooth stone—cold, heavy. "Hold it. Feel what's inside."

Rowan closed his fingers. Nothing. Then—warmth. Like sunlight

trapped in rock. His palm tingled. The stone lifted—hovering an inch above his hand. Green light flickered, faint as candle flame.

He dropped it. "What…?"

Silas didn't smile. "That's you. Not magic. Blood."

Rowan stared at his hand. The glow faded, but the hum stayed—like a second heartbeat. "Why me?"

"Because you're next. Every few centuries, one wakes. Stronger. Faster. Closer to the source." Silas paused. "The tree."

Rowan looked up. "Tree?"

Silas knelt, drew in the dirt: a twisted trunk, roots like veins, branches reaching skyward. "Life's root. Not just plants. People. If you know who they are—if they know you—they come back. But only the awakened can touch it. And only once."

Rowan traced the lines. "My family…"

Silas nodded. "They're waiting. But the tree's guarded. Hidden. And the watchers—my kind—don't like change."

He stood. "You're not ready. But you're close."

Rowan picked up the stone again. This time it floated steady. No fear—just quiet resolve. "Then teach me faster."

Silas watched him. "I will. But remember: every power costs. Use it wrong… you lose more than family."

Rowan didn't flinch. Just nodded. The green light pulsed brighter—steady, sure.

Page Ten: The Long Years

Time slipped like river water—months into years. Rowan turned sixteen, then seventeen, then eighteen. The cave became routine: dawn runs through fog, sword drills against birch trunks, nights staring at stars Silas pointed out—"That's where we came from."

Silas never softened. "Push harder." "Breathe deeper." "Feel the hum—don't fight it." Rowan did. Muscles corded under his skin, scars faded to silver lines. The green glow? No longer a flicker—it steadied, like a lantern he could dim or flare. He healed cuts in

seconds, lifted logs one-handed, bent wind to shield a fire from rain.

But he stayed quiet. No boasts. No questions about "why me." Just worked. Fixed what broke—mended Silas's cloak when it tore, carved bowls from driftwood, kept the cave dry. Silas watched. Said little.

One dusk, Rowan stood at the cave mouth. Sky bruised purple. He flexed his hand—light bloomed soft, then sharp. A pebble rose, spun, dropped.

Silas stepped beside him. "You're ready."

Rowan didn't turn. "For what?"

"The tree. The watchers. Your family." Silas paused. "But once you leave… you don't come back here. Not like this."

Rowan looked at the woods—dark, endless. Felt the hum in his chest, steady as breath. "I know."

Next morning: pack light—knife, cloak, pouch of dried meat. Silas handed him a map—rough charcoal on hide, lines twisting toward a valley no one named. "Follow the river north. Don't trust roads."

Rowan slung it over his shoulder. Looked back once. Silas stood in the firelight—silver eyes unreadable.

"Thanks," Rowan said. Simple.

Silas nodded. "Go."

Rowan stepped out. Mist swallowed the cave. Footsteps faded.

He was eighteen. Stronger than any knight. But still just a boy—carrying a relic's echo, a family's ghost, and a promise he'd keep.

Adventure didn't start with fanfare. It started with one step.

Page Eleven: The Road North

Rowan walked for three days—river on his left, woods thinning into scrub. No map needed; Silas's words stuck: "North. Follow the water till it widens. Then look for smoke."

His boots were worn, cloak heavy with dew. Hunger gnawed—berries and roots weren't enough anymore. The hum in his chest

kept him warm, but it didn't fill his stomach.

By dusk on the fourth, he crested a hill. Below: a town—stone walls, church spire poking through fog, roofs clustered like mushrooms. Lights flickered in windows. Smoke rose thick—bread, meat, life.

He paused. Felt the pull: supplies. A knife. Rope. Maybe news of bandits. But mostly—people. Real ones. Not ghosts.

He descended slow. Gates open—guards lazy, drunk. He slipped in. Streets narrow, cobbled, smelling of ale and horse. A market square: stalls half-packed, vendors calling last prices.

Rowan kept hood up. Bought bread—two loaves—with the last copper from the village. Added dried fish, a flint. The baker eyed him: "You look half-starved, lad." Rowan shrugged. "Long walk."

No one asked more. Good.

He found an inn—low roof, rafters black with soot. Paid for a corner bunk, no questions. Ate alone by the fire: bread torn, fish chewed slow. Felt eyes on him—merchants, travelers—but he stared back steady. No fight. Not yet.

Morning: he bartered the carved bird from his pack for rope and a waterskin. Then—rumors. "Bandits hit Eldridge weeks back. Whole place gone." Rowan listened. Didn't flinch. Just nodded. "Heard that."

He left before noon. Town behind him—supplies in his pouch, hum louder now. Like it knew what came next.

The tree waited. Family waited. And Rowan? He walked faster.

Page Twelve: Faces in the Fog

Rowan reached the town outskirts by noon—stone walls low, gates ajar like they didn't care who came in. The market square was half-empty: a few carts, sellers packing up, kids kicking stones. He kept hood low, eyes scanning. Not for trouble—just… people. Real ones.

He stopped at a baker's stall. Bread still warm. The girl behind it—

maybe sixteen, freckles, brown braid—handed him a loaf without asking. "You look like you've walked far."

Rowan took it. "North. Supplies."

She tilted her head. "North's bandit country. You alone?"

He nodded.

She glanced around, then leaned in. "I'm Mira. My brother's out that way—scouting. If you're heading up, stick with us. We travel in pairs."

Before he answered, a boy jogged over—tall, lanky, same freckles. "Mira, who's this?"

"Stranger. Looks like he could use a fire tonight."

The boy—Finn—grinned. "Come on. We're camped by the mill. No charge—just help chop wood."

Rowan hesitated. The hum in his chest stayed quiet—no warning. He followed.

Camp was simple: two tents, fire pit, a mule tied to a post. Finn tossed him an axe. "Start small. Don't want to wake the whole town."

Rowan swung—clean, steady. Wood split easy. Mira watched from the fire, stirring stew. "You're good with that. Not your first time?"

"Trained," he said. Short.

They ate together—stew thick with carrots, bread dipped in. Finn talked nonstop: "Bandits hit our last stop. Took everything. But we're tougher now." Mira rolled her eyes. "He's all talk."

Rowan listened. Laughed once—quiet, real. Felt… normal. Like back home, before.

Night fell. They shared blankets. Finn snored. Mira whispered: "You don't talk much. But you're not running from anything, are you?"

Rowan stared at the stars. "Not running. Going."

She nodded. "Good. We could use someone steady."

He didn't promise. But he stayed till dawn—helped pack, walked

with them a mile north. Then split off. "Thanks."

Mira waved. "Find us if you need."

Rowan kept walking. Alone again—but lighter. The tree waited. Family waited. And now? A couple faces he might see again.

Small step. But enough.

Page Thirteen: The Tree's Shadow

Rowan crested the ridge at dawn—fog thick as wool, river glinting silver below. He'd walked weeks: through bandit-haunted woods, past ruined farms, dodging patrols who thought him a deserter. Supplies gone. Boots shredded. But the hum? Louder every mile—like a drum in his ribs.

The map Silas gave ended here: a valley cupped between cliffs, no roads in. He scanned—nothing but mist and pines. Then—there. A shape. Tall, twisted, roots spilling like fingers into the stream. Bark black as charcoal, branches glowing faint blue. The Tree of Life.

He froze. It wasn't pretty. Not holy. Just… old. Like it'd been waiting forever. Air around it hummed—same as his blood, but deeper.

He stepped closer. Ground soft, mossy. Roots pulsed underfoot—warm, alive. He knelt. Touched one. Green light flared from his palm, met the bark. A whisper: Rowan.

His mum's voice. Soft. "We waited."

He swallowed. "I'm here."

But the tree didn't open. Didn't bloom. Just… watched. Like it knew he wasn't done.

Then—wind shifted. A crackle overhead. Sky tore—silver light, sharp. A figure dropped: tall, armored in light, eyes like cold stars. Watcher.

"You shouldn't be here," it said. Voice echoing. "This power's sealed. Your family's not ours."

Rowan stood. Hand glowing—bright now, steady. "They're mine."

The watcher raised a hand. Energy coiled—white, deadly. Rowan didn't flinch. Just breathed. The hum surged. Ground cracked. Roots rose—shielding him.

Fight started. No words. Just light clashing, wind howling. Rowan moved—fast, sure. Dodged beams, swung a branch like a staff. Powers woke full: healed mid-strike, bent air to block, pulled a root whip.

Watcher staggered. "You're too strong. Too soon."

Rowan grabbed its arm—green met silver. "Then stop me."

It vanished—poof, gone. Sky quiet again.

Rowan dropped to his knees. Tree's glow dimmed. Whispered again: "Not yet. Prove it."

He looked up—valley empty, but he knew. The tree wasn't giving back easy. Family waited. But first? More watchers. More fights.

He stood. Wiped sweat. "Fine. I'll earn it."

And walked on—deeper, toward whatever came next.

Page Fourteen: The Blood Bond

The watcher vanished in a flash of silver—leaving Rowan panting, knees in the moss. His arm throbbed; a shallow cut from the fight dripped red onto the roots. One drop hit the bark—sizzled, sank in. The tree shuddered.

Green veins lit up under the black skin, tracing upward like lightning. A voice—not his mum's this time—deep, ancient: Rowan. Blood of the awakened. Allegiance proven.

The trunk split slow—bark peeling like old skin. Inside: a hollow, glowing soft. No fruit, no flowers. Just… warmth. Like stepping into summer.

Rowan reached in. Felt fingers—small, familiar. Eda's. Then Lila's. Mum's. Dad's. They stepped out—not ghosts. Solid. Warm. Breathing.

Mum hugged him first—tight, no words. Sisters piled on. Dad ruffled his hair, same as always. "Took you long enough."

Rowan laughed—real, ragged. Tears hit the ground. The tree sealed shut behind them. Glow faded.

They walked out together. Valley quiet. No watchers. Just them.

Page Fifteen: Back to Eldridge

The village looked… wrong at first. Charred beams still stood, roofs half-gone. But Rowan led them in—quiet, sure. "We'll fix it."

Mum started sweeping ash. Dad hammered new posts. Sisters ran ahead—shouting at kids who peeked from hiding. "We're back!"

Word spread fast. Neighbors came—widows, farmers, the miller. Eyes wide. "How…?"

Rowan shrugged. "Long story."

Days blurred into weeks. He rebuilt the cottage—stronger now. Added a loft for the girls. Carved new toys. Trained at dawn—same stick swings—but now with Dad watching, grinning.

Nights: firelight, stories. Mum baked bread. Lila teased him—"Still the fixer?" He smiled. "Always."

Everything normal. No hum in his chest—just heartbeat. No watchers—just wind.

But sometimes, alone by the river, he'd flex his hand. Green flickered—faint, controlled. A reminder.

He'd earned this. Family. Home.

And if trouble came again? He'd meet it. Not angry. Just… ready.

Page Sixteen: The First Whisper

A week later. Dawn light slanted through the new shutters Rowan hammered in himself. Mum was kneading dough—same rhythm as always. Lila and Eda chased each other around the yard, laughing like nothing happened. Dad sat on the step, sharpening a hoe, glancing at Rowan every few seconds.

Rowan stood by the river—same spot he used to skip stones. Water clear, fish darting. He flexed his hand. Green flicker—faint, gone. But he felt it: deeper now. Like the tree left a door open.

He picked up a pebble. Held it. The stone warmed. Lifted an inch,

spun slow. He let it drop. "Still here," he muttered.

That night, fire crackling. Family around the table—bread fresh, stew bubbling. Dad raised a mug. "To second chances."

Rowan smiled. "To home."

But as he sipped, the hum spiked—sharp, like a needle. He set the mug down. Outside: wind picked up. Leaves swirled unnatural.

Dad noticed. "You alright?"

Rowan nodded. "Just... cold."

He stepped out. Moon high. Mist rolling in thick. Then—shadow. Tall, cloaked. Silver hair catching light. Kael.

He didn't attack. Just stood. Voice calm, metallic: "You fixed what was broken. Impressive. But your blood... it's spreading. The watchers see. Others will come."

Rowan tensed. Green light bloomed soft in his palms. "I won't let them near."

Kael tilted his head. "Not yet. But they will. And when they do... you'll learn what you're really made of."

He vanished—poof, gone. Like smoke.

Rowan stared at the empty spot. Hand still glowing.

Inside, Mum called: "Rowan?"

He went back. Sat. Ate. Said nothing.

But he knew: normal was over. Again.

Page Seventeen: Kael's First Move

It happened at dusk—sky turning bruise-purple, village lights flickering on like sleepy eyes. Rowan was out back, splitting logs for the fire. Axe thump, wood crack—steady rhythm. The hum in his chest? Quiet. Almost gone.

Then—air shifted. Like someone opened a window to space. Cold snap. Rowan paused, axe mid-swing.

Kael stepped from the trees. No sound. Just there. Silver hair catching the last light, armor humming faint blue. Plasma blade

sheathed at his hip—curved, glowing like a frozen lightning bolt.

He didn't draw it. Just looked. Eyes empty blue. "Rowan."

Rowan lowered the axe. "Kael."

"You know my name." Kael's voice echoed—metallic, calm. "Good. Means you're listening."

Rowan stepped forward. "You want the tree."

"No. I want you." Kael tilted his head. "Your blood's a key. My world dies—stars collapsing, tech failing. One drop of you... resets it all."

Rowan flexed. Green flickered in his veins—soft, then sharp. "Not happening."

Kael smiled—thin, sad. "Then prove it."

He moved—fast. Blade out in a blur. Rowan dodged—instinct—axe swinging up. Blade met wood—sparks flew. Rowan twisted, felt the hum surge. Axe handle glowed green—metal warmed, bent like rubber.

Kael pushed. Gravity field kicked in—air thickened, Rowan staggered. But he planted feet—roots from the ground rose, wrapped Kael's ankle. Tech sync: Rowan's veins lit up, pulled the field back—turned it into a push. Kael flew—landed rolling, cloak tearing.

He stood. "You're learning."

Rowan breathed hard. "I'm not fighting to win. Just to keep them safe."

Kael sheathed the blade. "Then keep learning. Because next time? I won't hold back."

He vanished—mist swallowing him.

Rowan dropped the axe. Hand trembling—green fading. Looked at the cottage: lights warm, voices inside.

He picked up the split log. Carried it in.

But he knew: the hum was louder now. And Kael? He'd be back.

Page Eighteen: The Breaking Point

Night fell thick over Eldridge—stars hidden, wind howling like it knew what was coming. Rowan stood alone on the hill above the village, cloak whipping. The hum roared now, green light bleeding from his skin like veins on fire.

Kael appeared—stepping from shadow into moonlight. Blade already drawn, plasma edge crackling blue. No words. Just a nod.

They charged.

Kael struck first—slash so fast it split air. Rowan ducked, rolled—axe from his belt swung up. Metal met plasma—sparks exploded. Rowan felt the heat sear his arm, but nanites kicked in: skin sealed, pain dulled.

Kael pressed—gravity field slammed down. Rowan staggered, knees buckling. Then—sync. His blood hummed louder. Roots burst from earth, wrapping Kael's legs. He twisted free, blade slicing one clean.

Rowan countered—grabbed the air, bent it. A wind wall slammed Kael back ten feet. He landed hard, armor cracking. Stood. "Good."

They circled. Kael lunged—plasma thrust. Rowan blocked with his forearm—green shield flared, absorbed the hit. But the force threw him—back slammed tree. Ribs cracked.

He spat blood. Stood. "Not done."

Kael charged again—blade overhead. Rowan met it—hands glowing, caught the edge bare. Metal burned his palms, but he held. Nanites rebuilt muscle mid-grip. He shoved—Kael flew, hit ground rolling.

Kael rose slow. Suit sparking, one eye dimmed. "You're... too much."

Rowan panted—blood on his lip, vision blurring. "I don't want to kill you."

Kael laughed—cold, tired. "Then why do I feel death?"

He swung final—gravity crush. Rowan roared—green exploded outward. Roots, wind, light—everything slammed Kael. Armor shattered. He dropped to knees, blade clattering.

Rowan staggered forward. Hand out. "Stop."

Kael looked up—eyes flickering. "You win. For now."

He vanished—blue flash, gone.

Rowan collapsed. Chest heaving. Green faded. Village lights below—safe. But his hands shook. The hum? Louder than ever.

He whispered: "Close."

Too close.

Page Nineteen: The Choice

Morning after the fight. Rowan sat on the cottage step—bruises fading fast, but eyes tired. Mum came out with tea, set it beside him. "You were gone all night. Again."

He stared at the river. "Something... came."

Dad joined them—hoe in hand, face lined. "We heard the wind. Saw the light."

Rowan looked up. "It was Kael. The one from before. He wants what's in me. If he finds me here..."

Mum's hand tightened on the cup. "Then we fight. Together."

"No." Rowan's voice was quiet. "You just got back. I won't lose you twice."

Lila poked her head out. "You can't just leave!"

He stood. "I can. And I will."

Dad stepped forward. "Boy—"

Rowan cut him off. "Listen. Every time I stay, the hum gets louder. They come closer. Kael's not the last—he said others will. If I'm here... they find you. If I'm gone... they follow me."

Mum's eyes welled. "And what about us? We wait?"

"You live. That's enough."

Silence. Wind rustled the new roof. Rowan hugged them—quick, hard. "I'll come back. When it's safe."

Dad gripped his shoulder. "Take the old pack. And this." He pressed a carved wooden star into Rowan's palm—the one Rowan made for Eda years ago. "Reminder."

Rowan nodded. "I'll keep it."

By noon, he was gone—cloak on, pack slung. Walked north toward the big town—stone walls, crowds, noise. Where he could blend. Where watchers might lose his trail.

Behind him, the cottage shrank. Mum waved once. He didn't wave back—just kept moving.

The hum? It followed. Like a promise. Or a curse.

He'd protect them. By leaving.

Page Twenty: The New Start

Rowan reached the town gates by midday—stone walls higher than Eldridge's, guards nodding him through without a word. Streets buzzed: carts rattling, vendors shouting, kids darting between legs. No one stared. Good.

He found work quick—blacksmith's apprentice. Old man Garrick, beard gray as ash, took one look at Rowan's hands (callused, steady) and grunted: "Start tomorrow. Hammer's yours. Don't break it."

Pay was copper—enough for bread, a bunk in the loft above the forge. Rowan nodded. "I'll earn more."

Days blurred: dawn fires, anvil rings, sweat stinging eyes. He hammered iron—swords, horseshoes, nails. Garrick watched him lift bars too heavy for most, said nothing. Rowan kept quiet. No glow. No hum. Just work.

Nights: he saved every coin. Stashed in a tin under his pallet. Dreamed of a house—stone walls, thatched roof, river nearby. Not for him. For them. When the watchers came again, he'd have somewhere safe. Somewhere they could hide.

One evening, Garrick tossed him a small pouch. "Bonus. You work like a demon."

Rowan took it. "Thanks."

Garrick eyed him. "You runnin' from somethin'?"

Rowan paused. "From what I am."

Garrick laughed—dry. "We all are. Just keep hammerin'."

Rowan smiled—first real one in weeks.

The hum stayed low. But he felt it—watching. Waiting.

He'd build. He'd wait. And when Kael came back? He'd be ready. Not as a hero. Just as the fixer who wouldn't break.

Page Twenty-One: Old Faces, New Shadows

Rowan hammered away in the forge—clang, clang—iron bending under his strikes. Sweat dripped, but he didn't mind. The rhythm kept the hum quiet.

Then—door creaked. Two figures stepped in: Mira and Finn. Same freckles, same grins. Mira's braid longer now, Finn's shoulders broader. They froze when they saw him.

"Rowan?" Mira said. "Thought you vanished north."

He set the hammer down. Wiped hands on apron. "Didn't vanish. Just... moved."

Finn laughed—loud, relieved. "We came looking. Heard rumors —'quiet lad with orange hair, works like a machine.' Knew it was you."

Rowan glanced at Garrick—old man nodded, "Take a break."

They stepped outside. Alley quiet, market hum distant. Mira crossed arms. "You left without saying. We worried."

Rowan shrugged. "Didn't want trouble following."

Finn leaned on the wall. "Trouble? Like what?"

Rowan hesitated. Green flickered—faint—in his palm. "Like... things that want what's inside me."

Mira's eyes narrowed. "Powers?"

He nodded. "Alien. Old. Waking up."

Finn whistled. "That's why you glow sometimes? We saw it—night you left. Thought it was lightning."

Mira stepped closer. "You don't have to do this alone. We're not scared. We're... friends."

Rowan looked at them—real, solid. Not family, but close. "If they come—for me—they'll come for anyone near."

Finn grinned. "Then we fight. Or run. Or fix it. Like you do."

Mira smiled—soft. "You're not the fixer anymore. But you don't have to be alone."

Rowan exhaled. Hum settled—calmer. "Alright. But no hero stuff. Just... stay sharp."

They nodded.

Back inside, Rowan picked up the hammer. Clang. Clang.

But now? The forge felt less empty. And the hum? It listened—like it approved.

Page Twenty-Two: The Right Direction

Rowan wiped soot from his face, hammer resting. Mira leaned on the forge door. "You can't live in the loft forever. Garrick's nice, but it's not home."

Finn nodded—arms crossed. "We got connections. Old Widow Thorne—owns half the riverbank. She's selling plots cheap 'cause no one's building out there. Quiet. Safe."

Rowan raised an eyebrow. "Why me?"

Mira smiled—soft. "Because you're not like the others. You fix things. She likes that. And... we owe you. For that night you left."

They walked him out—through market stalls, past the mill, down a cobbled lane. Widow Thorne's house: stone, ivy-covered, porch sagging but solid. She opened the door—gray hair in a bun, eyes sharp. "Heard you're the fixer from Eldridge."

Rowan nodded. "Need land. Something small."

She eyed him—then Mira and Finn. "These two vouch for you?"

Finn grinned. "He saved our hides once. Quiet, but steady."

Thorne grunted. "River plot—half-acre. No neighbors. Twenty silver."

Rowan pulled his tin—coins clinked. "Done."

She handed him a deed—rough parchment, sealed. "Build fast. Winter's coming."

Mira nudged him. "We know a carpenter—cheap, good. And I'll help with the roof. Finn's useless at that."

Finn laughed. "Oi!"

Rowan looked at the paper. Felt the weight—real, paper-thin. A start.

That night, he sat by the river—new land across the water. Green hum low, calm.

Mira sat beside him. "You okay?"

"Yeah. Feels... right."

She nodded. "We'll get you settled. Then—if trouble comes—we'll be ready."

He smiled—small. "Thanks."

The town lights glowed behind them. Home wasn't gone. Just... waiting.

Page Twenty-Three: The Montage

The days melted into one long, sunlit blur—hammer strikes echoing like heartbeat, laughter cutting through dust.

Rowan swung nails into beams, sweat on his brow. Finn hauled timber, grunting jokes: "If this roof caves, I'm blaming your alien hands!" Rowan grinned—first real one in months—tossed him a hammer. "Then hold it straight, genius."

Mira mixed mortar, sleeves rolled, freckles dusted white. She flicked a glob at Finn—hit his cheek. "Missed." He wiped it, laughed, chased her around the half-built walls. Rowan watched, axe paused, chest warm.

Evenings: they sat on the unfinished porch—sun dipping, river glittering. Mira sketched plans on scrap wood. "Window here—view of the hills. Like home." Rowan nodded. "Add a loft. For... guests."

Finn carved a sign—'Rowan's Fix'—nailed it crooked. "Perfect." Rowan straightened it. "Not yet."

Nights: fire pit crackling. Stories flowed—Mira's bad dates, Finn's failed fishing trips. Rowan shared little—old Eldridge tales, no powers. But when the hum flickered low, he let it—green glow lighting their faces like lanterns. They didn't flinch. Just smiled.

One afternoon, roof half-done: rain hit sudden. They ducked under beams, soaked, laughing. Finn slipped—Rowan caught him mid-fall, strength effortless. Mira clapped. "See? You're useful."

Rowan looked up—sky clearing. House rising. Not fancy. But theirs.

He whispered, "This'll do."

And for once, the hum didn't push. It hummed along—like it approved.

Page Twenty-Four: Eyes from the Trees

Kael crouched in the thicket—cloak blending with shadows, silver hair tucked under hood. The house rose slow: beams slotted, roof half-shingled, laughter drifting over the river like smoke.

He watched Rowan swing a hammer—steady, no glow. Mira passed nails, Finn joked about crooked walls. Rowan laughed—soft, real.

Kael's blue eyes narrowed. Not anger. Curiosity.

He'd come to scout—check if the glitch had spread, if Rowan was still a threat. But this... this wasn't isolation. Not a lone weapon. Just people. Building.

The hum in his own suit pulsed—matching Rowan's, faint. He touched his chest. "Adaptable," he murmured. "Not just power. Connection."

Mira flicked mortar at Finn—hit his nose. Rowan caught the laugh before it escaped. Kael tilted his head. "They trust him. No fear."

He'd seen races crumble under power—tech, blood, whatever. But here? Rowan fixed a beam, Mira steadied it, Finn hammered the nail. Team.

Kael's blade stayed sheathed. "Intriguing."

He slipped back—silent, gone.

But the hum lingered. Not threat. Question.

Maybe next time... he wouldn't strike.

Maybe he'd ask.

Page Twenty-Five: Flashback – Kael's Crown

Kael wasn't always the hunter.

Years ago—on a world called Veyra, where skies burned violet and cities floated on anti-grav rings—he stood in the throne room. Marble floors veined with star-metal, walls humming with energy shields. His father, King Thalor, sat on the throne: tall, silver-haired like him, eyes dimming from the sickness.

"You're next," Thalor said. Voice weak. "The throne's yours. But Veyra's dying—core collapsing. Tech failing. We need a reset."

Kael knelt. Armor new then—black plates crisp, no cracks. "I'll find it. The glitch. The blood that adapts."

Thalor gripped his shoulder. "Not as a killer. As a savior. Bring back the balance. Or... we all fade."

Kael rose. Felt the weight—not just armor. Crown. Duty.

He left that night—ship sleek, cloak billowing. No goodbyes. Just a promise: "I'll return. With everything."

Now, crouched in Earth's trees, watching Rowan hammer beams with friends... Kael's hand clenched. The blade at his hip hummed—same as Rowan's green.

He whispered, "You're not the only one carrying a legacy."

The flashback faded. Kael straightened. Not anger. Not fear.

Just... recognition.

A royal sees another royal—hiding in mud, building with mortals.

He turned away. "Not yet," he muttered. "But soon."

Page Twenty-Six: The Knock

The next morning—sun low, mist still clinging to the river. Rowan was up early, stacking fresh-cut beams by the half-built porch. Mira and Finn still asleep inside, snoring like they owned the place.

A knock. Sharp. Three taps.

Rowan froze. Hammer down. The hum spiked—green flicker in his veins.

He walked over. Opened the door.

Kael stood there—no armor, no blade. Just cloak, silver hair loose, eyes calm blue. Hands empty.

Rowan tensed. "You."

Kael didn't step in. Just looked past him—at the unfinished walls, the laughter still hanging in the air from last night.

"I'm not here to fight," he said. Voice low, no echo. "Just... a question."

Rowan crossed arms. "Ask."

Kael glanced at the roof—beams crooked, but solid. "How do you do it?"

Rowan blinked. "Do what?"

"Build. With them. Without fear. My world... we don't have that. We have crowns. Orders. Collapse."

Rowan exhaled. "We just... fix what's broken. One nail at a time."

Kael nodded—slow. "And if I asked... to help?"

Rowan stared. The hum settled—quiet, listening.

Mira stirred inside. "Rowan? Who's—"

Kael turned. "Never mind."

He stepped back. "Keep building."

Gone—mist swallowed him again.

Rowan shut the door. Hand on wood. Heart steady.

The hum? It felt... lighter. Like it learned something too.

Page Twenty-Seven: The Offer

Kael didn't vanish this time. He stayed—cloak still, eyes locked on Rowan like he was reading code.

"You fixed a house," Kael said. "A village. A family."

Rowan wiped his hands on his shirt. "I just... hammered nails."

Kael stepped closer—no threat, just weight. "My world needs

hammers. Not swords. Not crowns. Just... someone who fixes."

Rowan blinked. "You're asking me to—"

Kael raised a hand. Blue light swirled—portal opening, air rippling like water. "Come see."

Rowan glanced back—cottage quiet, Mira and Finn inside, unaware. The hum in his chest pulsed—curious, not scared.

He nodded. "One look."

They stepped through.

Veyra: skies violet-black, cities floating on cracked rings, buildings leaning like tired old men. Air tasted metallic—dying tech, failing gravity. People below—pale, silver-haired—stared up. No panic. Just hope.

Kael led him to the core—a massive orb, pulsing weak blue. "This keeps us alive. It's breaking. Your blood... it adapts. Rewires. Like you did with my blade."

Rowan touched it. Green flared—bright, steady. The orb hummed back. Cracks sealed. Rings straightened. Lights flickered on—whole city breathing again.

He pulled away. "Done."

Kael stared—eyes wide, not royal anymore. Just... grateful. "You didn't even try."

Rowan shrugged. "I fixed what's broken."

The portal reopened. Back on Earth—river still, house still half-built.

Kael bowed—slight. "Thank you. And... if you ever need help? Veyra owes you."

Rowan smiled—small. "Keep your crown. I got nails."

Kael vanished. For real this time.

Rowan walked inside. Mira looked up. "You were gone a second."

He laughed. "Felt longer."

The hum? Quiet. Satisfied.

No more threats. Just... balance.

Page Twenty-Eight: The Community

Rowan finished the last shingle—sun setting, river gold. House done: stone base, thatched roof, porch wide enough for three chairs. Not fancy. Just... his.

Mira and Finn showed up that evening—packs slung, grins wide. "We talked," Mira said. "Town's noisy. Forge's hot. And honestly? We like the quiet."

Finn kicked a pebble. "Plus, you're hopeless at cooking. Someone's gotta feed you."

Rowan laughed—easy now. "Door's open. Stay as long as you want."

They moved in next day. Mira took the loft—hung herbs, sketched plans on walls. Finn claimed the back room—carved shelves, strung fishing line. Rowan slept on the couch—first night, he stared at the ceiling, hum soft like lullaby.

Days turned cozy: mornings, Finn fished—came back with trout, Rowan grilled it. Afternoons, Mira fixed leaks—Rowan handed tools, no words needed. Evenings: fire pit, stories. No powers. No watchers. Just three people making normal out of nothing.

Neighbors trickled in—old Thorne with bread, kids peeking at the "glowy guy." Rowan waved them over. "Come sit."

Soon: garden patch—carrots, beans. A bench by the river. A sign: 'Rowan's Fix – All Welcome.'

The hum? It didn't spike. It settled—like it found a home too.

One night, Mira leaned back. "This... feels right."

Rowan nodded. "Yeah. It does."

Finn raised a mug. "To the weirdest family ever."

They clinked. Laughter echoed over water.

No threats. No crowns. Just a small community—built nail by nail, laugh by laugh.

Page Twenty-Nine: The Stirring

The fix was quiet at first. Rowan stepped back through the portal—Veyra's skies brighter, rings steady, people cheering faint behind him. Kael bowed once more. "You saved us."

Rowan shrugged. "Just... fixed it."

Back home, he hammered the last nail. Mira and Finn toasted with river-water mugs. Laughter. Firelight. Normal.

But in space—far beyond—something shifted.

When Rowan's blood touched the core, it didn't just heal. It rewired. Old code—forgotten, buried—woke. The planet's death wasn't random; it was a seal. And seals break.

Montage:

Stars flicker. A void cracks open—blacker than black.

Tendrils slither out—thin, hungry—like smoke with teeth.

Veyra's new light dims at the edges. People look up, smile fading.

Kael stands on a balcony—blade drawn. Eyes wide. "What did we unleash?"

On Earth: Rowan wakes sweating. Hum roars—not green, not warm. Dark. Like a whisper in his veins.

Mira knocks on his door. "You okay?"

He lies. "Yeah."

But the river ripples—unnatural. A shadow passes under the moon.

The entity isn't angry. Isn't evil. Just... born. From balance forced too hard.

It drifts—slow, patient. Toward the glitch that woke it.

Rowan stands on the porch. Green light in his palm—flickering, uncertain.

He whispers: "I fixed it. Now what?"

The stars answer: nothing.

End of part two.

The house stands. Friends sleep. But the dark? It's coming.